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Polling and the New Hampshire Primary

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As of this writing, the New Hampshire primary is scheduled to take place in just about two months—on Tuesday, February 9, just eight days after the first nomination contest, the Iowa caucuses. Numerous polls have already told us what the voters are contemplating “if the election were held today.” In interpreting what the polls mean for the actual primary election, however, we need to take into consideration several caveats.

1. Voters are mostly undecided (even close to election day).

The polls typically pressure respondents to say how they would vote if the election were held immediately, and so most poll respondents will give some name. But that doesn't mean they are committed to that candidate. Typically, leading up to the election, anywhere between half to three-quarters of the voters are still trying to decide whom to choose. That means that last-minute swings in support are quite possible and quite common.

For example, in the 2012 primary, 29 percent of GOP voters indicated *right before the election* that they were still unsure as to which candidate they would vote for. Two months before the 2012 primary, 59 percent were unsure. Two months before the 2016 primary, 55 percent of Republicans and 45 percent of Democrats say they still have not decided who they will vote for.

2. Even “decided” voters can change their minds at the last minute—because there are no party differences among candidates.

In a general election contest, voters' preferences are highly influenced by their party affiliation. Even voters who know little about a candidate can still rely on the candidate's party as an indicator of whom to choose. But in a primary contest, there is no party difference to anchor voter preferences. Often the policy differences among candidates are so slight, the voter could just as easily vote for one candidate as another. Thus, last minute ads, news stories, and

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—Amy Sterndale, Communications Director, Carsey School of Public Policy.

campaign activities that suddenly favor one candidate over another could cause a major swing in voter preferences in just a short time.

3. Pollsters' predictions of voter turnout are fraught with problems that can distort results.

Unlike many states, New Hampshire allows any resident of voting age to participate in the primary, even if they are not previously registered. Anywhere from 10 to 15 percent of a New Hampshire primary electorate consists of people who register to vote at the polls on Election Day. Many pollsters use past primary voting lists as their source for sampling respondents, but that approach would exclude the “walk-in” voters, who could be quite different from the rest of the voters—thus resulting in misleading poll results.

4. Final pre-election polls in the New Hampshire primary have often been right, but almost as often, they have been wrong.

Because of the factors mentioned above, polling in the New Hampshire primary has been inconsistent in its accuracy. In 2008, the polls did an excellent job in predicting the Republican winner (John McCain), but they were all wrong in predicting the Democratic winner (Hillary Clinton, not Barack Obama as the polls showed). Other years in which the polling in New Hampshire differed significantly from the final results include 1968, 1972, 1976, 1980, 1984, 1988, 1992, 1996, and 2000.

The major problem is that the polls typically stop two to three days before the election, and therefore don't catch changes that occur right before people vote. Exit polls (taken as voters leave the voting booths) have consistently shown that up to one-third or more of New Hampshire voters say they made up their minds only in the last three days before the election, including one in six who say they made up their minds on Election Day itself.

Given these caveats, it's prudent to take a skeptical look at what the polls are showing us. They measure voters' top-of-mind reactions to the candidates, but with no guarantee that the voters will retain those views as the election approaches.

The Iowa Effect

One thing to keep in mind is that the Iowa caucuses just eight days before the New Hampshire primary can upend candidate standings in New Hampshire, rendering irrelevant any polls taken prior to the Iowa contest. Unfortunately for pundits, the Iowa Effect is not always predictable.

For Republicans, *recent history* suggests the Iowa results have little effect on a candidate's standing in New Hampshire. Such was the case for George W. Bush in 2000, who won Iowa but lost big to John McCain in New Hampshire. Similarly, Mike Huckabee (2008) and Rick Santorum (2012) did not see any boost in their New Hampshire standings after winning in Iowa.

However, *not-so-recent history* provides a different lesson. In 1980, for example, George H. W. Bush was initially helped in New Hampshire by winning in Iowa, as was Bob Dole in 1988. And in 1996, Pat Buchanan was helped by his second place showing in Iowa.

While history gives us a mixed message about the effect of Iowa on New Hampshire for Republicans, a good showing in Iowa for Democrats typically helps the candidate in New Hampshire. That was the case with Obama in 2008, John Kerry in 2004, Richard Gephardt and Paul Simon in 1988, Gary Hart in 1984, and Jimmy Carter in 1980 and 1976. The good showings in Iowa did not always translate into victories in New Hampshire (for example, Obama, and Gephardt and Simon), but they did give the candidates a boost.

For 2016, the Iowa Effect seems uncertain for the GOP, but perhaps a bit more predictable for Democrats.

One explanation why Iowa seems to have no effect on New Hampshire for the Republican candidates in recent times is that the electorates in the two states are quite different. Exit polls in 2008 and 2012, for example,

show that 12 percent and 17 percent of Iowa caucus voters respectively considered themselves "moderate" or "liberal," compared with 45 percent and 47 percent respectively of New Hampshire primary voters. Also, the percentage of evangelicals in Iowa is almost three times greater than in New Hampshire: In 2008, 23 percent in New Hampshire, 60 percent in Iowa; in 2012, 22 percent in New Hampshire, 57 percent in Iowa.

By contrast, the ideological profile of Democratic voters in Iowa and New Hampshire are quite similar: In 2008, the last competitive cycle, exit polls showed Iowa with liberals outnumbering moderates/conservatives by 54 percent to 46 percent, while in New Hampshire the comparable figures were 57 percent to 43 percent.

Given these data, one could speculate that for Democrats, a victory in Iowa for either Bernie Sanders or Hillary Clinton could give the winner a boost in New Hampshire.

For Republicans, such speculation would be iffy. The GOP contest is complicated by Donald Trump, whose support appears fairly robust with both the very conservative/evangelical wing and also the less conservative wing of the party. One effect of Iowa, if not to help the top two or three candidates get a boost in New Hampshire (and Iowa may—or may not—do that), is that the Iowa caucus results may well reduce the slate of candidates. For both parties, Iowa has typically had a screening effect, with only the top two or three candidates able to continue effectively into New Hampshire.

Still, even that pattern may be upset this year, because of the large amounts of money available to candidates from rich donors—and because of the unusually large number of candidates. The screening process could be much slower this year, with well-funded candidates able to continue their campaigns even if they lose in several of the early contests.

As for current polls predicting the winners in New Hampshire, history suggests considerable caution. As that famous Yogi-ism warns us, "It ain't over till it's over."

About the Authors

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